

Teaching and learning at a distance: Opinions of tutors and students

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Abstract

The interest of this paper was focused on understanding the dynamic of the processes of teaching and learning within the frame of the Program "At Distance". Representations of teachers-tutors and students of the Program "At Distance", the development of the tutorials and the utilization of the materials were analysed. As regards the representations which tutors and students have on the Program, two images appeared: one associated to the formal aspects (time management, problem of massiveness) and the other to the pedagogical aspects (independent study, integral view of the course). The importance of the role played by tutors was pointed out and, at the same time, it is recognized that the performance of this role is expressed in many different ways. Finally, materials were considered the main instrument students have for their independent study. Nevertheless, various problems are detected as refers to utilization of materials. As a final reflection, it was stressed the need of accompanying the Program "At Distance" with an evaluative investigation which may allow gathering information for decision taking in relation to its handling.

Keywords: teaching - learning – representations – tutorials - materials

Introduction

Since year 1993, the Pedagogical Secretariat of the Faculty of Economical Sciences of the Buenos Aires University has been developing the Program "At Distance". Parallel to its appearance, an area was started of Evaluative Investigation with the objective of making a follow-up of the Program. Along these years, evaluating actions were carried out using different instruments for gathering information.

During the first four months of 1999, interviews were held with tutors and students of the courses corresponding to the Professional Cycle, which are carried out with this characteristic. The objective was to dig deeper into some aspects considered in the evaluation surveys used during 1998.

The interest –at this stage- was focused on understanding the dynamic of the processes of teaching and learning within the frame of the Program, and to make recommendations. With this objective in mind, deepening was undertaken, among other things, of representations of the tutors and students regarding the system At Distance, on the development of tutorials, and the utilization of the materials.

About representations

Human beings mediate and construct reality on the basis of the theories available to them. They create interpretations of reality through which they grant significance to actions and act according to such interpretations (Erickson, 1989; Pozos, 1989).

From this perspective, our interest to study the representations or beliefs of the teachers-tutors and the students of the Program At Distance, is based on the possibility of being able to better understand the pedagogical practices and aim at their improvement when considered necessary.

The "At Distance" modality has some characteristics which grant it a specific identity; nevertheless, different actors may have very diverse representations of the modality. Representations are constructed starting from one's own experience, from the information available, from values, etc. They also depend on the characteristics of the historical moment and of the institutional context.

As regards the representations which the tutors have on the Program we have seen that two images appear: one associated to the formal aspects (time management, problem of massiveness, among others) and the other to the pedagogical aspects (independent study, integral view of the course).

It is interesting to point out that this double perception is reiterated in the opinion of the students, although with different nuance which spring from their own role (possibility of attending more subjects, compatibilization of study and work). Nevertheless, in both cases, the perception of the Program appears fragmented. In general, no global understanding is registered of functioning or potentiality of the system. One aspect or the other (formal or pedagogical), or one role or the other (teacher or student), are stressed separately.

On the other hand, some tutors centre their impressions in the differences with the presential modality: they point out that this modality demands –contrary to the presential modality- having an integral view of the course and they stress the fact that working in the program allows them to learn how to teach. In these cases, replies are centred exclusively in the differences as far as role managing in one modality and the other. At the same time, it is pointed out that in the Program At Distance the role of the teacher "is to be an

aid, which depends on the needs of the students", which is marked as main difference with the presential modality: "there I teach everything". This answer calls one's attention, because it seems to suppose that in AD the pupil only learns that which the tutor "teaches" in class. No doubt, this coincides with the representation which many teachers still have of what a good university teaching practice is: teaching is a synonym of transmitting information and the protagonic role of the student in his learning process, is scarcely valued.

On the other hand, some students come to the Program with a prejudiced image, emerging from lack of knowledge or misinformation. Nevertheless, most of the students interviewed declare that their perception changed from the first time when they followed a course under this modality. It should be pointed out that the key factor for this change of perception to take place is the attitude of the tutor during the development of the tutorial instances. This is indicating the importance that, in spite of the characteristics of the modality, the presence and behaviour of the teacher has in the learning experience of the students and –as a consequence- in the image that is transmitted of the system.

Students who have gone through several courses with this modality, tend to characterize the program from its pedagogical potentiality, stressing the possibilities offered by the mediated learning by means of the materials used, where it is necessary to develop in greater measure the individual responsibility. The time variable, while considered in a flexible way and adaptable to possibilities and needs of each pupil, is clearly perceived as a great advantage offered by the modality.

In the second place, some students show as an advantage the possibility offered to them by the materials, starting with its didactic proposal, of establishing relations between the different concepts and authors. This aspect, in some cases, is seen clearly stressed by a good performance on the part of the tutor. In this sense, it is pointed out how good proposal of distance education helps construct logical key relations for the global understanding of the subject/course. We should point out the similarity which can be established between the perceptions of tutors and students: each one, according to his role, the peculiarity of the modality and its pedagogical proposal, has to make an effort of integration and global vision, which both admit that they not always have to make in traditional proposals.

When students are asked about disadvantages of the Program, the answers point at difficulties in the implementation, more than to aspects inherent to the system (for example, organization problems, scarce class time, classes purely consultative, lack of guidelines for independent study). Those aspects that students show as negative ones, are related, in a great measure, with bad teaching practices of the presential system which are transferred to this modality, as well as with a not too clear view of the functions of the tutor.

Also, in the opinion of the tutors as well as in that of the students, appears the idea that some subjects are more appropriate than others for distance learning. In that sense, it is supposed that theoretical subjects adequate themselves better than those that require much practice. Nevertheless, statistical data of approval of the courses in one modality or the other, do not support this opinion.

In summary, the opinions of teachers and students show a complementary view of the Program, for which reason they constitute an indispensable achievement to orient decision taking towards a continuous improvement of the proposal.

About tutorials

In distance education the importance of the role played by tutors is undoubtful. Nevertheless, the performance of this role is expressed in many different ways.

Traditionally, in the "at distance" modality the function of the tutor was limited to the task of orienting and aiding learning. In the meantime, teaching was understood as "transmission of information", function which remained to be done by the materials. Nevertheless, new pedagogical tendencies question this concept of teaching, placing an accent on the need to construct knowledge, through the development of reflexive processes.

Taking into consideration the key role that independent study on the part of the student plays in distance education, it is fundamental that tutors assume the commitment of offering a basic formation in strategies to favour autonomous learning.

A frequent claim on the part of the students is related precisely with the need to be oriented so that they can study independently. At the same time, tutors point out as main problems in implementing this modality, the lack of reading and the scarce preparation the students have to study on their own. It is interesting to point out that some tutors think that this could be solved by submitting a proposal to the students that they carry out reflection and/or production tasks stemming from the reading of the bibliography. But, this proposal which would permit a better follow-up of students, meets the difficulty of the lack of time on the part of the teachers for correcting their work.

Finally, we could speak of a false antinomy existing in the way the teachers carry out their own role and how they consider the participation of the students: to a more passive role of a student corresponds a more active role of the teacher, and vice versa, to a more active role of the student corresponds, generally, a more passive role of the teacher.

About materials

In distance education, elaboration of the materials occupies a central place, since they are the main instrument students have for their independent study.

The challenge is to make materials constitute a kind of "provoking and mobilizing" presence since they are the principal means of communication with the students. To obtain this, materials should be structured offering instances of information, of reflection (individual or in groups), of interchange or discussion, of data surveying in relation with a subject or problem, of elaboration of some work and of evaluation (Mena, 1994).

In general, important time is devoted to the construction of the pedagogical proposal of the material, but it is not always taken into account at the time of its implementation. Also, in some cases tutors are not sufficiently consubstantiated with the proposal. This is noticeable, especially when tutors have not

participated in the elaboration of the materials and have been unable to identify themselves with the proposal, which makes it difficult to develop a consistent job.

Within the materials, activities constitute the resource through which the students make use of their previous knowledge, abilities and strategies for learning and reflection, actively participating in the construction of their own knowledge. The activities that the students solve allow them to verify their grade of understanding of the contents taught and, therefore, fulfil a feedback function.

Nevertheless, as it can be seen in the opinions of tutors and students, various problems are detected as refers to utilization of materials. In the first place, a different valuation is registered on the part of tutors and students. Teachers tend to value the materials as long as they result appropriate for the performance of their teaching task, without considering the value that they may have for the independent learning of the students. On their side, the students value the materials more than the teachers do, since they consider them the only tool they have to study on their own. For the students, "all that is found in the materials helps because it replaces the word of the teacher".

In their majority, the students assert solving (even mentally) the activities proposed in the materials because they allow them to verify their understanding of the principal concepts. Nevertheless, they feel discouraged to solve activities when these are not retaken, or are not corrected by the tutors, in which case they cannot check their solution and, therefore, their understanding of the concepts. As long as the tutor does not retake the activities, he does not allow the students to auto evaluate themselves and verify their learning (one of the functions that students consider are responsibility of the tutors). At the same time, he is wasting the opportunity to evaluate the students and introduce modifications, which might be necessary. Thus, there is a distortion in the sense of this modality which promotes work and independent study of the students and, once again, the function of the tutor.

Another of the problems faced by the production of materials in distance education is the enormous difficulty which its updating brings about, since it must follow the rhythm of changes which are produced in the knowledge of the different disciplines and in their theoretical-methodological focus. In this sense, tutors show the need to renew materials regularly on the basis of changes made in the program of the course and in the bibliography.

As a Final Reflection

It is important to stress the need of accompanying the programs of distance education with an evaluative investigation which may allow gathering information for decision taking in relation to its handling. At the same time, it allows detecting problematic aspects that need to be deepened in new investigations. In this case, the social image of distance education appears as an important mediator of the processes of teaching and learning in its modality and will be, therefore, our object of study in future investigations.

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